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Here Comes the Neighbourhood

MILE END: A PLACE TO ART

PLACES LIKE CASA DEL POPOLO give developing artists venues to display their talents and get noticed

Where future greatness gets its break

MARIANNE ACKERMAN SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Casa del Popolo feels like a memory of the '60s. The door swings open into a cloud of warm kitchen smells laced with a whiff of old clothes and cigarette smoke. Or maybe it's something else, parsley, sage, rosemary or thyme.

The House of the People at 4873 St. Laurent Blvd. is a long, narrow room, dimly lit, with saggy sofas and a few tables along one side, a bar with stools along the other and in between, a narrow corridor of scuffed hardwood leading to a raised stage at the back. Avocado walls are covered with sketches or paintings by some local artist, according to an exhibition calendar booked months in advance.

That girl slapping veggie paté between slices of whole wheat bread? Chances are she plays in a band and is taking a break between tours. A former cigarette machine in one corner doles out packages of art. For $2 you can get a chapbook, poems or a couple of etchings.

Make no mistake: this is not a remnant of bygone days. Every centimetre of this popular music, art and literary venue is a choice by the youthful owners. The ancient wainscoting was carefully removed to make room for soundproofing and put back up. The style is anti-slick, on purpose.

Since it opened in September 2000, Casa has become the epicentre of Mile End's new music scene. The place to be, the place where it all began and to which the denizens of art return when they have paid their dues on the international touring circuit, or tried another city for a while, or just woken up at 3 p.m.

Deemed one of Canada's top five creative postal codes by a recent market survey, H2T is home and workplace to a visible minority St. Laurent Blvd. architect Éric Gauthier calls them the "bobo anglos" – part bohemian but a little bourgeois. Generally, they're adamantly green, pro-fair trade, fond of vintage clothing and one-of-a-kind designs by friends. At one time or another, virtually everybody's an artist.

For at least two decades, they've been descending on the Plateau Mont Royal in droves, coming from places as far away as Vancouver and Texas. Lured first by dirt cheap rents, these days they face a city on the rebound. In a neighbourhood that has known many leave-takings, some Mile End artist-entrepreneurs are turning tenacious.

Couple Kiva Stimac and Mauro Pezzente moved here from Toronto 15 years ago to attend university. Stimac, who was raised in Minnesota by hippie parents, studied anthropology at Concordia and dreamed of opening a café. While Pezzente was getting a Ph.D. in forestry at MacDonald College, he and two friends, Efrim Menuck and Mike Moya, founded the post-rock group Godspeed You! Black Emperor. Anti-capitalist and, as time passed, increasing anti-hype, the nine-member group made critical waves internationally in the late '90s before declaring a hiatus in 2003.

With the proceeds from Godspeed's heyday, Pezzente and Stimac opened a licensed vegetarian restaurant they hoped would nurture a burgeoning local music scene.

"There just weren't many places for local bands to play," Pezzente says. "And Montreal had really dropped off the touring circuit in the '90s. Nobody came through here."

Thanks in part to the Internet, which linked like-minded fans from near and far, Casa del Popolo quickly became successful beyond its founders' proverbial imaginations. Now, firmly established as a red dot on the world's indie music map, the 100-seat venue has launched a few ships of its own.

Pezzente recalls helping set up sound equipment for a newly formed boy-girl-friends' effort five years ago.

"They played to 10 people. They were terrible." Rapidly, however, Arcade Fire got its act together and (massively) took it on the road, becoming one of the headline sensations of the decade. Wolf Parade, Molly Peaches, Wrndzor for the Derby, Shalabi Effect ... the list is long.

In 2001, Pezzente snagged Arab Strap, a post-folk indie sensation from Scotland. After tickets sold out in 10 minutes, drawing a barrage of calls from disappointed fans, he rented a 350-seat hall in the former Jewish Workers' Building across the street.

Headquarters of the Club Espagnol, a group of Spanish expatriates, La Sala Rosa has become Casa's second home.

When their cook left, the club asked Stimac to take over the dining room, on the proviso that her menus feature traditional Spanish dishes.

"The least little variation in the amount of parsley in the tapas and somebody mentions it," she jokes.

Her venture has been a spectacular success. On a typical Saturday night, patrons often have to wait in line – although a corner table is empty, on permanent reserve for club members' card games. A small concession, Stimac says, for a spot that retains the warmth of an Old World private club – because it still is.

While Montreal's "cultural industries" have suddenly started garnering top-level political attention as sources of economic activity and tourist attractions, Mile End artist-entrepreneurs point to the gap between their concerns and the world of mega-projects like the $120-million Quartier des spectacles Montreal is planning. Such ventures serve established talent, cultural product.

But places like Casa and Sala Rosa are where future greatness gets that all-important first break, a difference some politicians and bureaucrats have trouble grasping.

Pezzente has had to contest 12 fines from the city over posters plastered on public property.

"They aren't even mine," he says. "They're art posters put up by musicians who play here, some of them created by artists who sell their stuff all over the world. But the mayor doesn't like mess."

He estimates he's spent $200,000 sound-proofing the two venues and bringing them up to code, plus hundreds of hours untangling red tape.

A few blocks farther up St. Laurent, Dan Webster, who hails from Niagara, Ont., has been working on getting performance licensing for two venues in the second-floor Mile End Cultural Centre since he signed the lease in 2003. The Green Room might get the green light in January, Webster says. The Main Hall's permit is still a ways off.

A decade ago, dozens of performance venues happily existed "off the radar." The leadership of today's music scene desperately wants on, and they're willing to fill out the forms to get there. Webster is networking furiously with his neighbours, asking them to check out the soundproofing and sign a petition acknowledging his sworn vow to keep noise under control.

Mess and noise are the necessary by-products of artists at work, a seemingly fatal attraction, the artists admit. People want to live in lively neighbourhoods like Mile End, but they also want peace. At least, that's the simple equation, pitting creative noisemakers on one side against holders of day jobs on the other.

Peaceful co-existence is neither an ideal nor a fight one side must win – it might be a necessity if Mile End is to remain in its current state of effervescence.

For a decade, veteran music journalist Juan Rodriguez has been happily ensconced in a second-floor apartment on Bernard St. Last summer, noise from a new bar across the street and the café below drove him to distraction. He went downstairs and told somebody off, an unpleasant if inconsequential encounter.

"I find myself thinking and behaving like an old man," he confesses. On an unseasonably warm day in the courtyard of Café Social on St. Viateur, a gust of rusty leaves falls on our heads and Rodriguez ponders moving to Little Italy.

"There's a layer of phoniness creeping into this area," he says, gazing around at the buoyant crowd. "I really can't stand people who say pasweesta, when they mean pasta. Reminds me sadly of what happened to Berkley in the '80s."

As he speaks, a greying, big-name musician waves at him from across the street. Then another. That is something he would miss.

> *"There's a layer of phoniness creeping into this area."*
> VETERAN JOURNALIST JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Louis Rastelli's art makes no noise and rarely involves a bar bill, but that hasn't kept his fan base from exploding. He's the man behind Distrobolo, a circuit of five cigarette machines (one of which is in Casa del Popolo) retooled to dispense small works of art. Since 2001, he has sold 25,000 packages by some 300 local artists. He's also the founder of Expozine, one of the largest small press, comic and zine fairs in North America, an annual event involving about 250 publishers, writers and graphic artists. The sixth edition of Expozine will be held next weekend.

Among the success stories on display will be works by Drawn and Quarterly, Canada's only English-language publisher of graphic novels. Founded in Mile End by Chris Oliveros in 1989, the company has a backlist of 90 titles and annual sales of $1.3 million, mainly in the United States. Oliveros credits Expozine for inspiring him to open a retail outlet. Drawn and Quarterly's beautifully designed bookstore at 211 Bernard St. W sells their work, plus graphic novels by other publishers and a limited selection of print-only books.

"Until Expozine took off, we'd just assumed there wasn't much interest in Montreal," Oliveros says. To date, sales have surpassed expectations. With a small stage at the back, the store hosts literary events as well as giving workshops in book binding, silk screening and other aspects of the art.

Top on the list of regular books in stock is Louis Rastelli's novel, A Pine Ending. Published last month by Toronto-based Insomniac Press, Rastelli's first-person tale of sex, drugs, rock, riff and kittens on the Main, circa the 1990s, is already the talk of the neighbourhood, as his many friends argue over who inspired which particular character.

Rastelli's protagonist, "Louis," sums up an era when full-time employment was not only hard for young people to come by, but considered a serious threat to the creative life. "In the back of my mind, there was always the dream of having my artistic pursuits advance to the point where I wouldn't need a day job any more," he muses. "But the stress of turning your art into a paying job can take the fun out of it."

Aye, there's the rub, still. Life in Rastelli's beloved neighbourhood grows pricey, while the artistic scene remains, to put it nicely, emerging.

A Franco-Ontarian who came here in 1979, actress Danette MacKay was a member of POV, one of a handful of alternative theatre companies formed in the 1980s. She and Simon Sachs bought a ramshackle house on Jeanne Mance St. in 1990, so their two young children could enjoy a backyard. She runs a vegan shoe concession at the L'Arterie, a clothing shop on Bernard St.

After graduating from Concordia University, MacKay worked steadily in film and TV until reaching what she describes as that awkward age, "too old to be the ingénue but too young for the hag." What she couldn't sell she decided to give away and has succeeded brilliantly. Her bilingual, more-or-less bi-monthly revue Kiss My Cabaret featuring song, dance, video and comedy has been playing to packed houses at La Sala Rosa for the past six years.

Emcee and performer in a popular comic routine, Madame et Matante, with Danielle Desormeaux, MacKay is also the producer, a job made easier by the format. All box-office profits go to charity thus eliminating the cost of paying talent and conforming to union rues. Nevertheless, she says she has a growing list of top performers eager to take part. The only advertising is by word of mouth and a mailing list created from the website.

"It would be great to have a real supper club," she says, "I'm sure it could work. But don't ask me to fill out grants, please! I just can't do that."

Expozine 2007 takes place Nov. 24 and 25, 12–6 p.m., at 5035 St. Dominique St. Laurier Metro. Admission is free. www.expozine.ca.

The next Kiss My Cabaret is Saturday, Dec. 8. Tickets are $10, on sale the week before at Casa del Popolo, 4873 St. Laurent Blvd., and Cheap Thrills, 2044 Metcalfe St.; also at the door, La Sala Rosa, 4848 St. Laurent, Bld. www.kissmycabaret.com.

Saturday: A place to work – Businesses big and small make Mile End a hub of creativity.

Yesterday: A place to live – The residents and real estate that give Mile End its charm.

Today: A place to art – Venues like Casa del Popolo make Mile End a popular destination for emerging artists.

PHOTOS: JOHN MAHONEY THE GAZETTE

"There just weren't many places for local bands to play" in Montreal, says Mauro Pezzente, who opened Casa del Popolo in 2000 to fill that niche.

Louis Rastelli's converted cigarette vending machines now sell a variety of artistic products.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH: Gazette photographer John Mahoney captures the sights and scenes of Mile End in a video and online gallery at montrealgazette.com

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